

RM-9115

From: Marshall King <marshall@whidbey.net>
To: "fccinfo@fcc.gov" <fccinfo@fcc.gov>
Date: 12/2/97 4:40am
Subject: ELIMINATE RACES

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DEC - 9 1997

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

Commissioners:

I submit the following for your consideration. I am also submitting it to the editors of QST magazine, in the event they think it worthy of publication.

I appreciate your giving it serious thought.

73 de Marshall King, N7PIP

CC: "vanriper@whidbey.com" <vanriper@whidbey.com>

Mr. J. C. ...
12/2/97

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An Open Letter To The FCC

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The amateur radio communications component of FEMA, known as RACES, has been in existence long enough that we may now evaluate its worth. The conclusions of many serious amateur radio operators is that RACES is not only ineffective but it presents serious obstacles to the efforts of the more structured and highly successful emergency services group known as ARES, the Amateur Radio Emergency Services.

As the commissioners know, in order to provide the public with immediate communications when called upon by civil authorities whose facilities have either failed or become overloaded, ARES members have long been the proven mainstay of emergency communications. Theirs is not an ad lib operation; they are trained well in advance to provide fast, efficient assistance through a top-to-bottom structure based on preparation and continual testing. This is not always the case with RACES, and even when it is, serious conflicts exist.

Why Is RACES Not Working?

The single biggest bugaboo with multiple agencies during an emergency is: WHO IS IN CHARGE? This question may not pose a problem in those localities where the RACES county Radio Officer (RO) is also the ARES Emergency Coordinator (EC) chosen by the local ARES membership and who has their full support. This support is essential and is built around LOCAL activities... meetings, construction projects and drills... which prevail on a regular basis among local ARES members.

In such cases, if an emergency requires the participation of the more distant (and more seldom-used) RACES structure, the EC/RO simply includes his ARES members in that extended operation as well, as long as it is needed. When the widespread emergency subsides, the EC/RO can drop his group out of RACES participation and retire the ARES group when local circumstances permit.

But a trend is afoot that is tearing this system apart. That trend: the separation of ARES and RACES into conflicting operations. What happens when this takes place? While such a split may occur for any number of reasons in various localities, a close look at a current living example will tell it all, an actual case history that shows at least one way that RACES can interfere with an ongoing ARES operation. For want of a better name, we'll call it Ajax County to protect the guilty, a real-life county still suffering from such a split.

The newly-appointed sheriff of Ajax County had never met the large body of active hams in his area, comprised virtually of the Ajax County Amateur Radio Club (ACARC) with a membership of 80. Like most radio clubs in the land it is affiliated with the ARRL and its ARES protocol. Instead, he passed down the word through one of his underlings that he did not approve of their EC/RO of long standing and was thereby installing an RO of his own choosing, without asking the members for their input to his selection. This was an unfortunate move on his part, for the displaced RO was someone who had the respect and allegiance of his group, whereas the new RO did not, for reasons given below.

The sheriff's move was particularly strange since his new RO, in the event of a RACES call-up, would have to beseech the cooperation of the very club members who were being ignored by the new sheriff! Not smart.

Since the sheriff had not bothered to introduce himself to the ham community (its members did not even know what he looked like) it was clear that such a move was political, for reasons never made clear. While this fact may seem irrelevant to our interest here, similar splits, for whatever local reasons, are occurring more frequently throughout the land. In the case of Ajax county, what was once a smooth-running Emergency Services team was beginning to fall apart. The results:

SPLIT NETS

The replacement RO was someone who had dropped club membership some time in the past and had started to oppose much of the club's efforts in emergency work. Therefore, it was almost predictable that the vast majority of ARES members, who felt they had received a slap in the face from the county, resented the new "RACES" situation and thus excluded RACES from their thinking. To those who may see this attitude as unseasoned, the ARES group pointed out that if the sheriff (or DES) called upon their EC during an emergency they were ready to go. However, if he called upon the RO, he'd have to take whatever he got from his new appointee... no longer was it one and the same group.

In the meantime the new RO, in deciding to establish a weekly RACES net, tried to commandeer what was once the weekly ARES net, using the ARES roster for a rollcall and using the same date-and-time on the same designated repeater. But with only 5 people checking in instead of the usual 25 or so as on the previous ARES net, the RO had to be content with the loss of the bulk of available hams. Meanwhile, rather than get engaged in petty warfare, the EC moved the long-standing ARES net to another date-and-time on the repeater. What appeared as the county's efforts to split ARES/RACES was now assured.

A STRUCTURE DESTROYED

Beyond the above annoyances lies the question: Who calls the shots? In the case of a split ARES/RACES operation as in the above example, if in an emergency the Incident Commander (the sheriff or his DES) calls upon his RO to activate the ham community the results may be dubious, as shown above. In some areas it may be the same if he calls upon ARES, if they are an emphatic minority in the split. Either way, if neither group will honor the call-up of the other, serious conflict is guaranteed.

No need to elaborate here on the chaos which would occur if he called upon each group to do its thing separately.... a scramble for rosters, a scramble for frequencies and repeaters, a scramble for authority in Net Control, a conflict of over-the-air instructions, two separate groups of hams trying to deal with the local civil agencies, et cetera et cetera ad nauseum.

The answer in local operations, some would say, would be to go back to square one and have ARES/RACES combined, with a single ham calling the shots. This sounds attractive on the surface, except that it encourages the ongoing existence of RACES which, unlike ARES, stands idle most of the time. Its usage is not only dwarfed by that of ARES, but its purposes are duplicated as well. Worst of all, with RACES in the picture, the arrow points in the wrong direction: it has been assumed somewhere that authority trickles down from RACES to ARES, whereas just the opposite is absolutely necessary. It is imperative that local groups keep control of and have the final say over emergency operations in their own areas. All these years RACES should have been accountable to ARES, not the other way around.

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A SIMPLE SOLUTION

The solution, of course, is to get rid of RACES. Its redundancy makes it unnecessary. A better plan, already in place, may be staring us in the face: while eliminating RACES altogether, let ARES make good use of the "liaison" system so successfully employed every day of every year by the NTS (National Traffic System).

In this manner ARES continues to serve its local areas in all parts of the country, but at the same time it designates certain hams who have volunteered to be liaison operators during more widespread emergencies, moving local traffic OUT of their communities to the outer perimeters (county, state, federal). And in the absence of RACES, who would these local liaison members be contacting at, say, the state level? They'd contact ham operators who had been designated as liaisons at the state DEM to bring IN traffic from the outlying areas. It's a system that's in widespread use by the NTS and is clearly laid out in the ARRL "Public Service Communications Manual." Simple, effective, proven.

Beyond this, the "liaison" concept ensures that ARES is in no way isolated from other branches of emergency communications. While it is imperative that ARES maintain its autonomy under its own proven structure, liaison operation allows contact with other groups such as REACT or ACS by conducting any necessary communication through ARES operators who pass bi-directional traffic on frequencies designated for that purpose.

CONCLUSIONS

In any event, it should be important to the FCC, and to the whole concept of emergency communications, that the ARES protocol, which is always in place, does not relinquish its command to RACES or any other group which may activate itself from time to time. Since the success of radio assistance lies in giving attention at the point of need, namely, in the LOCAL area involved rather than at a distant temporary command post, it should be clear that RACES is superfluous.

There is no question that amateur radio operators, whether active only in RACES, or ARES, or both, do not want to see the system fall apart. There are no "good guys" or "bad guys" in this dilemma. The entire emergency services idea is based on volunteerism and has no place for personal notoriety, for the "uniform and badge" syndrome, or for any scrambling for position. If such fractures are a result of the duplicity caused by RACES, then it's time to get rid of RACES altogether. That would benefit both the FCC and the amateur radio operators throughout the land. Let FEMA do its work in the areas it's best suited for and leave emergency communications to those who have a viable system for its continuing success.

Marshall King, N7PIP